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We Can't Hear You!

Imagine your first week at a new school. You've barely met your classmates, found your classrooms and the library, or cracked open your books. Then your teacher tells you you'll soon be reading case law in front of your classmates.

"At first I was sort of put off by it. It seems like a private thing, like it's you and your case book with your own thoughts," first-year University of Dayton School of Law student Taylor Gillespie said about her tort law lab. "You don't really want people judging you. That's what you're worried about, since we're new."

Classmate Anthony Gore, who also is taking the course taught by Lori Shaw, professor of lawyering skills, admitted to some butterflies, saying, "It was different."

But did anything change after their first torts law lab this fall where they were on stage?

"It's given us insight on how to read cases and read with a purpose," Gore said. "I like it. I've been able to pull back different layers."

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And Gillespie?

"It's been nice to team up with a classmate and experience it together," she said. "It's been good to get feedback and think about how I'm doing this. Am I thorough in what I'm reading? I'm glad we are doing this."

So what exactly is a law lab?

"Think of a biology class," said Shaw, who also serves as the School of Law's associate dean for academic affairs. "The lecture teaches you the skills and the lab is where you practice those skills."

The school will offer another lab, in criminal law, in the spring. The labs are part of the law school's approach to teaching students how to read cases.

Shaw pointed out labs like this are necessary because using traditional teaching methods isn't holding water. She added that the Law School Admissions Council found students are no better reading after the first or third years than at the start of law school. So educators now are trying to look for ways to be more explicit about skills and processes, one of which is reading a case.

"I definitely think I understand what she wants us to obtain from this. I won't say I'm necessarily there yet," Gillespie said. "But when I do my assignments for other classes, I can apply the same method of reading with a purpose and how Dean Shaw has broken it down for us."

The idea has clicked for Gore, too.

"Reading with a purpose. Reading predictively. Reading actively. I think that's the whole idea," he said.

Early on, Shaw is seeing the benefits.

"I see a lot of positive things. I see students learning more about their reading," Shaw said. "That's why I like this particular exercise, because it makes them do a little bit of self-reflection. I see them starting to make connections, starting to visualize the story based on the facts in the case."

A national publication covering the wind power engineering industry and several local outlets featured the University of Dayton Research Institute's new wind turbine to boost alternative-energy research and educational opportunities. Also, Caroline Waldron Merithew was the subject of a American Historical Association member spotlight and Law.com blog Ahead of the Curve and an op-ed in Inside Higher Ed discussed the School of Law's entry into online education.

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"I want them to answer, 'Am I really digging in to see if I understand the case?' You need to really understand at the sentence level of the case to understand why the court ruled the way it did."

And how would Gillespie advise next year's first-year law students?

"Embrace it," she said. "Dean Shaw is a great professor. She knows what she's doing, and she obviously has us doing these exercises for a reason, because they are beneficial. Try not be nervous, because it's going to be OK."

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